

UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL  
19 July 1985

MISSILE  
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WASHINGTON

A CIA reassessment of the Soviet SS-19 intercontinental missile has concluded that the nuclear-armed weapon is less accurate and poses less of a threat to the U.S. missile force than first believed, administration sources said Friday.

But the Pentagon's Defense Intelligence Agency disagrees with the CIA re-evaluation, contained in a secret report known as the National Intelligence Estimate that is prepared annually by the CIA.

"We believe the CIA view is completely wrong," a Pentagon official said of the assessment, speaking on condition he not be identified. "We believe the CIA analysis is based on incorrect assumptions. They've made a mistake. We are convinced the CIA is wrong and will be proven wrong over time."

The Pentagon calculates the Soviet Union has deployed 360 of the six-warhead SS-19s, which the U.S. intelligence community previously characterized unanimously as having the capability to destroy U.S. Minuteman missiles in their silos.

U.S. officials used the SS-19 and the bigger SS-18, which carries 10 warheads each, to support arguments for building the 10-warhead MX to give the United States an appropriate nuclear counter-punch.

The CIA re-evaluation of the SS-19's capabilities first was reported by Michael Gordon in Friday's issue of the weekly National Journal magazine. Administration sources confirmed the account.

The article quotes a Pentagon official as saying that the revised CIA estimate had reduced the projected accuracy of the SS-19 by "better than a third," extending the radius of the missile warhead's circular error of probability from 1,000 feet to 1,300 feet.

The circular error of probability, known as CEP, is the radius of a circle in which a warhead has a 50 percent chance of falling. It is a standard measure of warhead accuracy.

A Pentagon official said the revised CIA estimate "did reduce" the estimated accuracy of the SS-19 warhead, but he declined to go into detail.

But U.S. officials suggested the reassessment largely was valueless because there is widespread agreement in the intelligence community that the SS-18 is sufficiently accurate to knock out all 1,000 Minuteman. The Pentagon estimates the Soviets have deployed 308 SS-18s.

"Even if they're right," a Pentagon official said of the CIA's reassessment, "it doesn't make any difference because the Soviets have enough to cover all of the hard targets in the United States" without the SS-19.

Hard targets are missile silos and command and control installations that can be destroyed only with multi-kiloton nuclear warheads.